

Some of the most difficult and touching discussions I have had with constituents in Nebraska involve parents of children with autism—the difficulty of costs, degrees of manifestation and of the condition, and uncertainties about the child's future. If you or anyone you know has an autistic friend or family member, then you are quite aware of the impact on families.

Autism is a developmental disorder that usually appears in the first three years of a child's life, and affects his or her brain's development of social and communication skills. It is growing in its frequency and diagnosis, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) today 1 in 100 American children have autism spectrum disorder, or nearly 673,000 children across the nation.

While the causes and implications of autism are not yet well-understood, the various avenues and networks of support for those affected by it are growing more extensive and accessible. In my office, I occasionally receive requests from constituents for information about resources that might provide assistance and therapy for autistic children. It is important to note there are several avenues of support in Nebraska.

The State of Nebraska has developed an early diagnosis and treatment program called the Early Development Network (EDN), designed particularly to serve children from birth to three years old who display any of the symptoms within the autism spectrum. This is a unique partnership between Nebraska's Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. In this program, a services coordinator is provided, along with special education services through the school district. An assigned therapist will work with the child in the home or school setting up to age three, after which time the services become tailored more specifically to the school setting in most cases. The child can continue to receive special therapy up until age 21, if needed, predominantly in the school setting.

Additionally, the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha (UNMC) is a highly specialized therapy option for families. The Center conducts an evaluation of the child and determines a plan for therapy that can vary in intensity depending on the severity of the child's condition. Many families have found this Center to be a very valuable resource.

Most recently, Nebraska has applied to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid for an Autism Medicaid Waiver. Upon approval, this waiver will enable the State to launch an autism treatment pilot program for the next five years. Intensive early intervention that includes 10-30 hours per week of individualized therapy will be provided to meet the needs of the participating children. To participate, children must have verification of a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, must be under nine years of age at the onset of the participation, and – due to a limited space of 85 participants per year – must be selected in a random lottery system. Family income will not be a consideration for selection; however, the cost of the services will be shared by the federal and state governments, and by the family on an income-based sliding scale that ranges between 1% and 5% of gross income. This pilot program may be launched as soon as January 1, 2010.

I deeply respect the special efforts made by families who care for the most vulnerable among us, including special needs children. At my Lincoln office, information packets that highlight several autism services in our state are available to anyone interested. Below, I have also listed some additional online resources. I hope this information proves helpful to those with the challenges of caring for an autistic child.

Autism Society of Nebraska www.autismnebraska.org

Early Development Network <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/edn/>

Nebraska Autism Spectrum Disorders Network <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/autism/index.html>

Nebraska Department of Education/office of Special Education <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/sped/index.html>

UNMC-Munroe Meyers Institute <http://www.unmc.edu/mmi/severebehavior.htm>

Parent Training Information Center <http://www.pti-nebraska.org/>